

Breathing Room

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Breathing Room

by [papercranes](#)

Summary

Dream Team | Rock Band AU

Clay, a rising vocalist, joins forces with bandleader George to write the next hit rock album for their band, Breathing Room. As the two explore their feelings and music, how will their relationship to the band, and with each other, pan out?

Notes

Of course, I respect Dream and George's friendship and have no intention on imposing on that, and would take this story down if asked to. That being said, this is my first ever piece of fiction and I would greatly appreciate any kudos and comments if you enjoy!

Chapter 1

Two fists hit the keys of the electric keyboard in frustration, releasing a loud cacophony of noise into the otherwise rather quiet room. “Ouch,” hisses George, clutching his wrist, which immediately began throbbing in pain.

“Jeez, George,” groans Alyssa, waking up from her catnap on the heavily pillowed couch to the discordant sound of smashed piano keys. Pulling in her cardigan in tighter to act as a blanket, Alyssa turns to her side and slowly opens her eyes to the bright studio lights. “That is what Mr. Lockhart from high school would have called *noise*, George, not *music*.” Alyssa sits up, curling her knees up into herself and rubbing her neck as she says, “And certainly not rock and roll.

“I’ve forgotten how difficult it is to write a new song. And I don’t think it helps that you’ve been asleep and Nick has been tapping his fingers against the table right next to me,” George says.

Nick looks up, feigning hurt. “Hey, you asked for a drummer. This is a band. I’m not sure what else you expected from me,” he says, continuing to tap against the table in rapid succession, slapping his palm against his empty water bottle to finish off the riff.

“I- didn’t- ask for you-” says George in between Nick’s taps. “We started playing together sophomore year. But as the bandleader, I have half a mind to kick you out right now,” teases George.

“Shut it, George.”

Alyssa shushes both of them. “George, you have the same concern every time you begin to write a new song. You’re not sure you can ever write one again, and then inspiration hits, and then you ask for praise for the rest of the day. Just because we went on tour doesn’t mean it won’t be the same as always. I’ll help test out some chord progressions with you,” says Alyssa, rising to join George at the piano bench.

George smiles, moving over, allowing Alyssa to test out some melodies. George thinks back to their beginnings, entering into school talent shows and local coffeehouses, with the occasional invitations to perform in bars in Philadelphia, not an experience George nor Nick could share with many other 17 or 18 year olds. When Alyssa joined as a keyboardist after graduation, and the three renamed the band to *Breathing Room*, they knew they would make it, although nobody said so explicitly. *Breathing Room* released their first album, *Tell Me Lies* six months ago. The last song of the album, *Multiplied*, which neither George nor the rest of his bandmates expected to create much fanfare, topped rock music charts, and the attention of plenty of news outlets and magazines, including the Inquirer, Relix, and by a stroke of good luck, Variety Magazine.

Their manager, Rocco Hunt, had managed to score *Breathing Room* a tour from Maine to Miami, and *Breathing Room* was quickly transported from their recording studios and garage band practices to tour buses, with new hotels and cities to explore every night. It was their first taste of larger performances - the nervous frenzy, the overwhelming thrill of a crowd that knew the words and sang along with you, and the general high and sense of delirium one got post-show. All three were buzzing to perform again. And if not for the music, Nick always reminds George that he loves, and he means *loves*, the groupies.

After taking a short break post-tour, George, Alyssa, and Nick were now three days into songwriting sessions, that often dragged into the late afternoon or until they had reached a state of listlessness. Still sleepy Alyssa had evidently reached that point an hour ago, but the three were

asked to stay longer that day to meet with Rocco to discuss the vision for their next album.

George and Alyssa test a few different accompaniments for *Breathing Room*'s first new song, *How Many Do You Have?* Its premise involved the singer asking his ex-lover how many shared memories she can still remember after their relationship abruptly ended, for better or for worse.

With ideas of trills and future bends of his electric guitar swirling in his brain, George hardly heard Nick open the door for Rocco to enter. Rocco cleared his throat. “You know, it’s said that ‘sex, drugs, and rock and roll’ are lumped together because of how equally addicting they are,” says Rocco, with a deep chuckle. George stands and gives Rocco a quick hug with a warm smile. The two had a long history, with Rocco being the first person George met after moving from Britain to the U.S. during a random walk through his neighborhood. At just 13, Rocco had said he saw star material in George, much before he knew he even wanted to pursue music. Rocco could do no harm, and always had a particular soft spot for George, among his clients, and among the members of *Breathing Room* too.

It’s easy to miss someone after having spent every hour for 8 weeks on a cramped tour bus together, so the three spent the next bit of time catching up with Rocco before discussing their new song. George explains their idea for the song: “A long term couple has just broken up and completely broken off contact. As the feeling of each other’s company slips away, the singer asks his ex-lover how many memories she can still remember, and how many are fading away.”

“Interesting,” Rocco says. “Play what you’ve got.”

Alyssa settles down to the piano and George picks up the studio’s lonely acoustic guitar. Everyone knew George could feel the music from the few lines they had written out. They could hear the song’s meaning through his subtle protective hesitation as well as eager yearning in both his voice and in his notes as the two played through the introduction and first chorus, with Nick and Rocco watching intently. “And that’s all we’ve got,” George says.

Rocco smiles. “That would be just perfect.”

“Perfect for what?” asks Nick.

“That’s what I came here to discuss,” says Rocco. “*Breathing Room* is growing rapidly, and I think at least one song of your new album should be a duet collaboration with another artist. It gets your foot in the door.”

“A collaboration? Why’s that?” Alyssa questions.

“For all the reasons. You’ll diversify your audiences, gain more networking opportunities. More importantly, though, it’ll give your songs more variety and prove to the world you can do more with the types of songs you make. I don’t think you’ve forgotten about that one comment that Relix Magazine gave your last album, even if it was mostly positive.”

Rubbing his neck, George shifts a little. “Don’t remind me.” Relix had painted George as a man desperate to get his girl back from the content of the songs he had written: “simp material,” as they called it.

Rocco gives a little laugh. “If nothing else, it will just allow another voice on the track so George isn’t always the only one singing. Imagine if a second person was singing in that song *How Many Do You Have?* and was maybe the ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend, forming new memories with her. It could give you guys a new vision.”

"If you want someone new singing, maybe Nick can step in," suggests Alyssa.

Nick shoots Alyssa a look. "You know I can't sing. I can give George a little backup from the drums but beyond that, don't even suggest it." Nick smirks. "If we're looking for a new 'vision,' maybe Alyssa should wear those little crop tops on stage more often."

"Dream on," says Alyssa, launching a pillow from the couch at Nick.

George starts, "It's not a bad idea. You're already giving me ideas on what to add to *How Many Do You Have?*" says George, mind wandering off a little. "But we couldn't take just anyone. I wouldn't want someone riding off our coattails... Do you have anyone in mind?"

Indeed, Rocco had lots of people in mind, dropping a small stack of cards with artist names, genres, songs, and number of Spotify listeners. The three sort through different artists, mostly indie rock vocalists, testing how each musician would fit in with themselves. Ricky Montgomery: too light. Charlie Burg: too mellow. "Whistler Allen? He does drums, Rocco," George says. Rocco insists he does vocals too. They continue sorting through the artists, stopping to play tracks if any were unfamiliar with their work.

"Who's Clay Cotter?" asks George, coming upon one of the last options in the pile, lifting the card.

"I was hoping you'd be intrigued. I caught a song of his a few weeks ago and he has quite the voice. I'm telling you he's got it. He's like what you'd imagine rock artists were like in the 70s. Now... he's got quite a smaller audience than the rest of everyone here, but he's playing his first show in Union Transfer down in Philly tonight, and I want you three to come watch him."

"Union Transfer?" George scoffs. "We played there three years ago. I'm not sure about this one," protests George, already beginning to place Clay's card to the side.

Rocco shoots out his hand to grasp George's previously bruised wrist. "I've never done you three wrong. Just take a look at him live tonight," Rocco says, standing up and slipping into his overcoat. "I'll pick you three up at 8 and drive you over."

And that was that. Nobody really questions Rocco because they don't really have to. Their next best choice, after all, was Whistler Allen.

The four show up to Union Transfer thirty minutes into the show, since Alyssa had just woken up at Rocco's arrival and scrambled to get ready. "You don't need that lipstick," said Nick in the car ride over. "Who are you trying to impress?" Alyssa shot Nick a look, murmuring that she'd stick it somewhere in particular one day.

Rocco quickly hands over their tickets, ushering the three into the door to the general admission standing room. George lingers back with Rocco as Alyssa and Nick head in, door propped open slightly. George starts, "Rocco, I'm not totally sure about this. Alyssa, Nick, and I have been working on this for years now. *Breathing Room* is like our collective baby. I just want to let you know now that I appreciate the efforts, as I always have and always will, but I don't want you to get your hopes too high."

"I get it George," assures Rocco. "I know you have trust in me, and I have equal trust in your decision. But I think you may be surprised." George nods. Rocco places his hand on George's shoulder as he leads both of them into the standing area, searching for Nick and Alyssa as the sounds of an electric bass solo surrounds them.

As they enter, George catches Alyssa watching the stage, leaning on one foot and suddenly cocking her head and neck forward. “Oh?” she lets out, intrigued.

“Keep your pants on, Alyssa,” says Nick.

A voice breaks the impressive bass solo and George is reminded why they’re here, turning his head to the stage. Clay’s voice was low and strong. It was the unique sort of voice that reminds you of a river traveling over rocks, gravelly and raspy, yet smooth and bubbling. He transferred between notes seamlessly, singing from his diaphragm, a subtle skill they taught in choir but took many singers years to master.

And Clay himself? He didn’t have the sort of beauty that was all sharp angles and dark features like George had. But he stood tall, broad chested, and strong, with dark blond hair curling slightly to his eyes - pale green-grey eyes deep set under a strong brow bone. He looked dangerous, in a sense. George felt he might be staring, and then remembered he was at a concert. Besides, to Clay, looking probably was staring anyway. It didn’t surprise George that Alyssa had taken a quick fancy.

The audience didn’t know most of Clay’s songs but took a quick liking to him. George could feel Clay held the same presence no matter where he went, not just on stage. They listen through Clay’s set of original songs, swaying and clapping with the rest of the audience. Slowly becoming more impressed, George imagines how their voices might match, Clay’s rough and scratchy, and George’s pure and silvery. The thought reminds George of Mark Lanegan and Isobell Campbell’s unquestionable juxtapositional pairing in their album *Hawk*. It then occurs to George that Rocco wasn’t only impressed by Clay’s voice, who would certainly do well as a solo artist, but by how George and Clay might play out together. *Rocco always knew*, George thinks, his hesitation about the prospect of inviting Clay to join in on a collaboration shriveling up.

When the set ended, Rocco, who apparently had connections with everyone at Union Transfer, led the members of *Breathing Room* to the back room to await Clay’s departure from the stage and interaction with the audience. “Wow, I think you were right Rocco,” says Alyssa rather breathlessly.

“Quite epic,” says Nick.

“Why are you talking like that? Quite epic,” George mocks. They discuss excitedly while Rocco excuses himself to catch up with a producer that was scouting the Transfer.

Clay enters backstage shortly after and walks directly to the three of them, laughing in the corner together.

“Hello,” says Clay, voice just as low as on stage, but more welcoming than before. “*Breathing Room*, backstage with me! It’s great to meet you all.” He turns to George. “I loved your song *Grin and Bear It*. Really reminded me of my family and why I’m doing all this.”

Caught off guard, George slowly smiles. “Wow, thank you.” While not the most popular, *Grin and Bear It* was George’s favorite song that he had written off their last album. Reviewers had written it off as another breakup song, and while that’s what the song was on the surface, it was also meant to be a story about the heartbroken singer getting back to his or her roots after heartbreak - what he was doing and why he was doing it, now that there was no longer any dependence on another person. “That was my favorite of the songs we’ve written. Your performance was phenomenal.”

Nick and Alyssa echo George’s thoughts, offering praise to their particular favorite songs and asking why he had chosen to play the bass. After a bit of conversation, Nick looks at the rest of

them and says, “So I think we have a question to ask you.”

“Whether I’d like to collaborate on your next album?” teases Clay.

Open mouthed, George asks, “so you knew? Did Rocco tell you to begin with?”

“Yes. He made no guarantee but he seemed rather excited about the prospect and let me know that the three of you would be in attendance at my show today.”

“So you were trying to impress us?” asks Alyssa.

Clay laughs a little and turns his gaze towards George. “Well, did it work?” he asks, looking directly into George’s eyes, with a certain darkness. George suddenly felt disarmed, and as if the walls were falling around him. George could say nothing until Nick stepped in.

“It sure did. You can ask Alyssa,” says Nick, while Alyssa lightly smacks his side.

“I’d be happy to join,” says Clay, throwing a nonchalant hand towards George. George accepts the handshake, regaining his composure as excitement for the journey ahead took over. As they shake hands, George feels a sudden wash of feeling that he had just signed onto a deal much greater than he imagined, as if Fate had right then and there cast a spell over him, a spell of exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. In any case, this moment felt inevitable. George doesn’t realize he was watching their hands clasped together until Clay finally pulls away.

Nearly dizzy, George straightens himself and manages to ask, “So do you think you’ll fit in with us?”

At that moment, two young women stumble in through the back door, each with a beer in hand. “Oh, whoops! This isn’t the bathroom.” This strikes George as funny since they had entered through the outside entrance. “Great show!” one of them yells at Clay, giggling.

The other, a short-haired brunette grabs her friend, and exclaims, “Wait, that’s *Breathing Room!* We love their music, Angie! And there’s Nick!” She runs straight up to them and asks, “Nick, will you please sign my tits? I just love drummers.”

Laughing, Nick searches for a marker. “Always happy to oblige.”

Clay lets out a small wheeze, looking to George to answer his question. “Yes, I think I’ll fit in nicely.”

Colorblinded

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for reading! I appreciate the kind feedback.
I've attached the lyrics to the song that Clay and George write together at the end of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay, now an honorary member of *Breathing Room*, talked with the three for another hour after the show at Union Transfer before shaking hands and splitting ways. Rocco agrees to drive George back home, who wanted to get started on writing songs straight away, while Clay offers to drive Nick and Alyssa around for a while more.

"How about some grub? My favorite diner's just up the interstate in Jersey," Clay asks Alyssa and Nick.

"I'm starving," Alyssa says.

"It's nearly midnight," Nick stops and looks pointedly at the green Dodge Challenger at the edge of the lot. "Of course that's your car."

He smiles. "It's on its last leg. But we've had our memories." The three enter and take off out of the parking lot, just edging out Rocco and George.

As they enter the interstate, Clay lazily scrolls through the radio stations, eventually humming along with *The Shins*. Alyssa makes a disgruntled noise from the passenger seat and immediately switches the station. He changes it back. Alyssa immediately changes it again. They continue until Nick is laughing from the back seat.

"This is my car, Alyssa. Christ."

"Yeah, well these are my ears," she says satisfactorily, settling on an alt rock station and blasting *The Pixies*. Clay thinks, and decides then and there that Alyssa, like him, was a stubborn force to be reckoned with and relinquishes control over the radio station. Clay and Nick had also quickly fallen into an easy friendship, the kind you could tell you could go years without seeing one another and have the ability to pick up right where you left off before.

Sitting in a car with strangers he had just met, weaving through the interstate, with windows down and music up, laughing all the way to their destination, it strikes Clay that this was one of those once in a lifetime moments you don't easily forget.

Clay, Nick, and Alyssa arrive at the diner in no time and order massive platters of food. Trading stories from the road over appetizers and fries, Clay forms a quick bond with Nick and Alyssa.

To Alyssa's dismay, she learns that Clay and Nick are really quite alike, watching as they both excitedly engage in a spitball fight with the booth of teenagers across from them in the diner.

Wet lumps of paper from the spitball fight litter their booth. Just as they're wrapping up their

meals, Alyssa asks, “you two will really be a nightmare in the studio together, won’t you?”

“You can bet on it,” Nick smirks.

Clay laughs, “I’m the newcomer, so it really depends. I’ve never produced music with others before. What is George like, really? He seemed a little intense when I caught you guys from the stage.” Clay thinks back to catching George’s eyes from the stage. His gaze had made Clay feel, strangely, as if he was the only person in the room, even with an audience. It had felt as though Clay was singing directly to him, and it had taken effort to break that gaze.

Nick scoffs. “Intense? George is a big baby.”

“He’s not intense. George started this band and treats it like his baby, so he might have been a little unsure to watch your performance. But I know what you mean. He takes a great deal of time to write his music and can be a little protective of it when we make fun of him for it. But trust the process, as they say,” says Alyssa, finishing off the last of her garlic bread.

“Interesting,” Clay says, as the three pack up their leftovers and sign off for the night. It strikes him strange that Alyssa described George as protective. He remembers when they shook hands, and caught George watching their hands, with a certain level of vulnerability - as if things would change henceforth. And maybe it would.

Clay drives both Alyssa and Nick home, leaving off with promises of excitement for their first session together in a week.

Clay arrives at his first writing session with *Breathing Room* to the sound of bickering.

“Shave it off! You look like a creep with that mustache,” yells George, pointing a spare drumstick at Nick. George was sitting from the pillow couch, knees tucked into his chest. Clay froze at the door, wondering whether they had even noticed he had come in.

“I looked like a skinned cat without one. I know you’re just jealous Georgie, because some guys like you just can’t grow a mustache like I can. Am I right, Clay?” Nick asks, bringing attention to his arrival.

“Hey. Get that energy out of here,” says Alyssa sternly, before Clay can say anything. She shoots lasers at Nick. “Besides, George is right. It’s been one week apart and you come back looking like a porn producer.”

George stifles a laugh against his hand, and is suddenly bubbling with laughter and giggles, until everyone else is bent over laughing with him, with each peal of laughter tripping over the next uncontrollably. When everyone finally straightens up and manages to welcome Clay to the studio, George suggests they jump right into the music, pulling out a small blue journal, scrawled and scratched with verses and choruses for the album he had been working on. George pulls a guitar onto the couch with him. He announces, “of course... this isn’t the final, or anything,” shuffling a little.

George remains on the couch, holding the small acoustic guitar to his chest as he strums and sings the lyrics to a few songs he had written. It takes him by surprise when George first starts singing. He had a voice that was pure, silvery, and almost plaintive. It hit you directly, like a warmed blanket draped over your shoulders. George sounded nearly identical to the voice on *Breathing Room*’s final recordings, but Clay had assumed producers used some form of autotuning before release, until now.

Clay listens to his lyrics carefully, trying to understand George's vision for each song. *How Many Do You Have?* was about the memories of a relationship. *Ablaze* was about promising to do everything in their heart to make a romantic relationship work. *Your Colors*' lyrics were about the colors associated with a romantic relationship; *You were amber, lavender, and watermelon pink / A brush dipped in paint, my missing link*. There was merit to each of the songs, but to Clay, it all felt a little... one-dimensional. Nick and Alyssa encouragingly tap their feet, but Clay can't help but think that George sounds like a 13-year old girl in love.

When George finished, Nick and Alyssa were already excited to begin refining their parts, and fitting in solos wherever they could. Clay, in awe, stops them. "Now hold on. I'm not singing an entire album about how much you're still in love with your ex, or whoever this is," he says, pointing to the blue journal of lyrics.

George takes surprise and cocks his head to the side. "My ex? There's no ex. These are the songs I wrote. If you want to help with making refinements, then we can start from there."

"I'm not trying to knock it, but all of these songs are about love, or being in love... and it's great that you have written a bunch of songs already, but we are supposed to be writing these together if we're doing a collaboration," Clay says, almost wishing he could bite his tongue. "Plus, I'm not sure why you use so many biblical references."

George slowly stands from the couch, so he's at eye level with Clay, who was leaning against the piano. When George stands, a wave of resentment seems to rise with him, with a bit of a tremor in his voice and hands. "Remember we invited you on. This next album still needs to have the style of *Breathing Room*, which I know is not necessarily the sort of stuff you usually write about."

"The sort of stuff I usually write about? What's that supposed to mean?" he asks, taken aback.

"You know," George chides. "All woe is me, and-". Clay starts feeling the heat rising himself.

"Okay, stop." Alyssa declares. God bless Alyssa for being that voice of reason, before it escalated any further. The room seemed to be crackling with energy. "No matter what compromise you two want to make, this definitely isn't the way to handle it." A silence settles for a little bit, with nobody looking at each other. Alyssa waits for anyone to speak. Finally, she sighs, and settles for mediation. "Let's start again tomorrow. George, you're going to be more receptive to new ideas. Clay, you have to come in with your own edits or song ideas in mind before insulting anyone. And Nick will come back clean shaven tomorrow."

George stifles a laugh. Clay quickly finds himself annoyed. Why had George insulted him just as easily without any form of rebuke? And how was he laughing so soon after? Hand already on his jacket, he's soon out the door, with Alyssa and Nick close behind.

A lump rises to his throat as he approaches his car. He gripped his car keys tightly, with the grooves digging into his palms. It angered him, how easily George took everything in stride and launched back at him. More than that it scared himself how quickly he felt he had ruined things, with a group of people he thought he could work well with. He remembers the night of fun he shared with Alyssa and Nick. Clay pauses to think, his mind swirling around what he might have ruined. He then forcefully pushes that thought down, swallowing it away. *I'm trying to make this the best album this world has seen, and I should make no apologies for it*, he thinks. He recites this thought to himself, patiently.

Clay realizes he could just leave, possibly for the first and last time, and George would write the entire album himself. He shuts his eyes and lets go of his car door handle, turning right back around to turn back into the studio. *Oh no you won't, not without me.*

Looking through the glass, Clay can see George standing in the middle of the room with his journal of lyrics in hand. He had a look of concern on his face, and was reading the lyrics carefully. Clay opens the door carefully and George turns right around when he enters, as if he were expecting him back any second. “I’m sorry,” Clay starts, before he even knows what he is apologizing for. “I said the wrong things. Sometimes when I don’t feel I have complete control over a situation, I lose all control at once. It’s the perfectionism, the stubbornness in me, and that doesn’t mix well with music,” Clay says, breathlessly. “I want to write this album with you.”

George pauses, watching Clay with a furrowed brow, and then softens. “I see. I think I was scared you were right,” he says, holding up his journal. “I felt defensive of my music, so I lashed out.” They look at each other, almost knowingly. “Looks like we’re both can’t help reverting to habits that we know aren’t healthy.”

“Now, that’s a song,” Clay grins. George smiles slightly, and it’s quickly understood what their goal is.

The two spend the rest of the afternoon revising the song *Your Colors*. They discover that George wrote verses beautifully, but Clay could structure persuasive choruses. Quickly, *Your Colors* transformed from a song about the colors in a relationship to a song about how overwhelming and difficult it can be to escape those habits, feelings, and temptations associated with a toxic relationship. Clay suggested they change the name of the song to convey the beauty and pain of temptations, and the song was renamed to *Colorblinded*.

He quickly finds comfort working with George. Clay lays on the couch, tossing a ball into the air as George puts his final touches on the song. He turns on his side in a huff, sighing, before tossing the ball against George’s shoulder. “What’s the hold up?”

“Shut up, I’m thinking.” George taps his pen against his closed lips, deep in thought. “I think I want to change these last lines that you worked on: *If I could come to my senses / Will I want to know the truth?* What do you think of this: *So when I come to my senses / Will I want to know the truth?*”

“I love it,” Clay resounds. “It gives the singer and listener some hope, whether or not it’s really true.”

George smiles widely, scratching in the new lyrics. Almost none of George’s nor Clay’s original lyrics made it to this final copy, but it was for the better. The interplay and revising they did together - either he or George could try out one lyric and understand what the other was thinking even before they said anything. It was a damn good song. When he finishes, George straightens up. He pulls the guitar back onto his lap, and looks Clay in the eyes. “Okay, I’ll try out this version. Remember, it may not be perfect or anything...”

“Don’t make any disclaimers. You know it’s good,” Clay assures him. George smiles again, a wide, plastered smile, with crinkled eyes and faint dimples. *That’s one smile*, Clay thinks to himself - the infectious kind of smile that triggers everyone else in the room to smile too, like a contagious virus passing through. Once again, Clay suddenly feels as if he and George were the only people in the world. All of the worries Clay held before stepping into the studio, after all of the anger and tension they shared before, manage to fade away.

George tries out the song, and it is just as exceptional as they predicted. Next, he and George trade lines and verses of the songs as they had planned to sing. Clay sings with his eyes closed, on his back, letting the lyrics sink in, taking pride in the work they had made together. After the song ends, he feels a light scrape against his wrist, which hangs over the couch end. He opens his eyes to

George, who had quickly rested his fingers over his hand. His fingertips were calloused, most probably from years of playing instruments. Just touching him, he could scrape you. "Thank you Clay, for helping me make this song better. I have to say it has never come easier to me before," he says, before pulling his hand back to begin packing up his guitar.

They say their goodbyes and exit the studio into the parking lot. When he reaches his car, Clay looks up, where a moon hangs high in the sky. He really did not realize how late it had become.

Chapter End Notes

Colorblinded

[Verse 1]

You were amber, lavender, and watermelon pink,
A brush dipped in paint, my missing link.
Bright playgrounds, scratched vinyls, jolly ranchers,
And I, possessed with love, colorblinded.

But you were also pitch-black, green, and crimson,
An arrow with its own trajectory,
Nobody could touch you, high or low.
A heartbreak dressed up like rock 'n' roll.

[Pre-Chorus]

But when you left,
The colors remained,
The violets, the russets, the blues,
Like poking an ugly bruise.

[Chorus]

These blinded eyes
They don't see so good
What's worse is if they could
Would I really say my goodbyes?

[Bridge]

If I could take off the glasses,
If I could blink out the tears,
If I could come to my senses,
What colors will remain?

[Chorus]

These blinded eyes
They don't see so good
What's worse is if they could
Would I really say my goodbyes?

[Outro]

Because some of us chase our dreams
But some of us chase our nightmares.
So when I come to my senses,

Will I want to know the truth?

Ablaze

Chapter Notes

I have attached the lyrics to Ablaze, the song discussed in this chapter in the end notes.
Thank you greatly for feedback and kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George spent the next week flitting in and out of the songwriting studio. Its painted walls and uncomfortable benches became as familiar to him as his own bed at home. The truth was, George had never been as excited to write music as he had before.

George and Clay worked closely together on melodies and lyrics, working as late as they needed. It was like new life was breathed into him. He was reminded of why he fell in love with music in the first place. Music digs. It questions the stories, the emotions, whatever truth you wanted to expose.

And, it was incredibly easy working with Clay. He briefly recalls the second day of songwriting, where they were working on refining an original song Clay had introduced to all of the bandmates, a duet named *Evergreen*. *Evergreen* told the story of two lovers who broke each other's hearts, but both were quietly holding on to hope that they would eventually end up back together. “*Through frost and storm / Through sting and smoke screen / This branch holds strong like the evergreen.*”

“Damn, Clay,” said Alyssa.

“Yeah, who hurt you man?” Nick questioned.

They all agreed it was a great song.

It seemed as though George and Clay had been writing songs together for years. They understood how to work together: how to make the music universal yet how to write the subtleties, how to write the harmonies to match the melodies. They weren't afraid of calling each other's ideas dumb, and laughing about it afterwards. They trusted each other's changes without needing to discuss them either.

One afternoon, Clay was working with Alyssa and Nick on composing their bass and drum lines. A thought suddenly struck George about two verses of *Evergreen*, and he quietly scratched new lyrics into Clay's journal when he had his back turned, who was focused on adjusting his bass amplifier.

It wasn't that Clay hadn't noticed. Later, George caught him studying the lyrics again, holding a subtle, soft smile when he read George's new lyrics.

A few days later, when George and Nick were refining the drum beat on *How Many Do You Have?*, Clay had done the same, making his new addition to the notebook. George also pretended not to have noticed any difference to the chorus, although it would have been hard not to notice Clay's chicken scratch marked into the page next to his neater handwriting. When they rehearsed with all the pieces put together, he would sing Clay's new suggestions happily, smiling at him. They made each other better.

So that's how it goes. George takes on the responsibility of unlocking the studio by coming in earlier than all the others. Truthfully, he also likes to beat the morning traffic and the hot summer sun and have a moment alone at the keyboard.

But today, when George inserts the key into the studio, it surprises him that the door is already unlocked. He steps in carefully, craning his head towards the songwriting room, to find Clay already standing there.

"How'd you get a key?" he asks, incredulously, relaxing a little.

"Found one under the doormat," he says, as if it's obvious. "Not the best hiding place, I think. Anyway, I wrote a song last night, and wanted to see what you thought."

George tilts his head a little. "So you came in early?" He grabs his guitar from the corner, beginning to tune it.

"I guess so? It doesn't really matter, does it?"

No, it didn't matter. But neither of them had come in early before to show one another their work, and especially not with Nick and Alyssa absent. "No, no, of course it's fine. I want to hear it. What's it about?" George strums nonchalantly.

Clay pauses, his body wavering a little. "It's about that love at first sight sort of feeling. It's about meeting your soulmate for the first time, and just knowing. Something along those lines. I know, it sounds cheesy."

George suddenly feels a little flustered. Love at first sight? Soulmates? The sort of straight-up lovey-dovey stuff they were veering away from for this album? His eyes are pulled away from his guitar and he looks into Clay's eyes, perplexed.

George is quickly reminded of the first night they met, up in Union Transfer where Clay was performing, where he felt himself looking into his pale green eyes up on stage. He stood in the middle of a cheering audience, watching him, until the walls and the people faded away as if he and Clay were the only two in the room.

You know how people compare beautiful eyes to diamonds and emeralds? In that moment, George thinks, *Fuck those metaphors*. And maybe it's because George is a little bit (and maybe a lot of bit) colorblind, but in that moment, he thinks that Clay's eyes are more like rubies and pearls. His gaze was dark, like danger and confidence. And sometimes, they shone, like when they wrote songs together, or like right now, searching George's face for some response.

"George."

"Sorry, yes, let's hear it." And so they quickly fall into that easy interplay they share together as he listens to Clay's lyrics.

Nick and Alyssa join them soon after, offering their input on the song and together naming the song *Ablaze*. Alyssa and Nick split off to prepare their first drafts for instrumental composition.

Despite its initial premise, the song held the sort of darkness that George and Clay knew they were looking for. *Ablaze* was a song about "love at first sight," about feeling like you knew someone long before you met them. "*This strange beginning / Is only a sequel I'm skimming.*"

But it was also about the uncertainty in putting all your faith into someone you feel you can trust from the get-go. It was about how to handle all that energy, all that attraction you may feel towards

someone. “*So should I stop and question? / Or can I trust my intuition?*”

The song was shaping up, but George couldn’t help but think that something else might be taking shape. Was this song about something else? It hit surprisingly close, reminding him of Clay’s and his effortless work-friendship, despite the fact that they had not known each other just two weeks ago.

George thinks back to his first songwriting session with just Rocco and Nick. “Don’t try to write too much about your own issues,” Rocco advised, with a wink. “You don’t want to be singing that shit every night.”

But George hadn’t written this song. So could he really tell what Clay was thinking?

When the lyrics were finalized, the two move over to Nick’s and Alyssa’s stations, where they had already established a strong drum sequence and guide keys for *Ablaze*. Together, they begin testing out guide drum and bass lines.

After an hour, nothing seems to be working. The instrumental layer feels too strong, no matter how much they pare back the guitar or bass or try simpler chords. “Maybe there are just too many instruments. Should we just strip the drum and bass lines?” Alyssa asks.

“Maybe,” George says, tired. The day had already been draining and confusing.

“Hold on, let me try something,” Nick says, putting down his drum sticks. He walks over to the corner supply closet and lugs out an instrument case, and interestingly, a small, chipped block of rosin.

“A... violin? You have got to be kidding me,” Clay leans over, laughing. “What, you’re going to play us a tune to get our spirits back up or something?”

“No, I’m going to include it in the piece. Just you watch.”

“This is rock, Nick. What are you going to do with a violin? Do you even know how to play it?”

George jumps in. “He does. First chair on orchestra all four years of high school, even when we were playing shows with Breathing Room. But I’m also not sure about this,” he says, hesitantly.

“Guys. Strings can go hard. *Kashmir? Baba O’Riley?* I left my violin here hoping for just the right song one day.” Nick settles the violin in between his chin and shoulder, slowly twisting the tuning pegs.

“What the hell, prove me wrong,” Clay says with his hands in the air.

Nick pulls a few long strokes across each string, adjusting the tuning. He straightens the messy bass line they had composed on sheet music in front of him, and begins, bowing a few slow, light notes on the violin. The tune he composes is innocent, questioning, curious. He transitions into a crescendo and nods at Clay’s bass to pick up at the next measure.

Clay is quick to respond, resting the instrument on his lap and strumming softly, following a similar pattern, strumming louder and faster. Slowly, their lines weave in and out with one another, as if they’re fighting for space in the small studio, but more aptly as if the violin and bass are just missing each other, like identical sinusoidal waves just out of sync.

George and Alyssa raise an eyebrow at each other as the two continue playing. It makes immediate

sense- two starkly contrasting instruments running scales and silences just opposite each other, almost like two soulmates just missing each other but never meeting. The violin adds dimension George's guitar couldn't, an almost a feminine energy to match the more masculine bass. It was almost similar to how George's silvery voice and Clay's gravelled voice fit contrarily in the song.

Clay slaps a hand against the fretboard and he and Nick's lines meet towards the end of the interlude in thunderous harmony, confident, exciting, alive, sharing a melody. As they end, Clay shoves his bass onto Alyssa, who was sitting next to him, startling her. He stands up, exclaiming "let's record, right now."

George chokes on his laughter a little. "What? Right now?"

"Yes, right now," he says, pulling George up by the wrists.

Laughter continues to bubble in him. "Stop, Clay!" he bats his hands away. "Sandra isn't even in the city right now."

"Sandra?"

"Sandra, our sound engineer," Alyssa says.

"Oh, I can do that. You don't think I mic'd myself up and mixed my own songs when I was working alone?" Clay is already standing by the soundboards in the adjacent room, sorting through the cabinets of mics.

George scoffs. "You're so stupid, you know? You're like a puppy."

"Now you're just asking for puppy dog eyes," he says, peeping his head in and feigning hurt.

So they spend the rest of the day doing just that. Clay maneuvers the recording studio with surprising expertise, especially for his first time working in this studio. He knows which mics can handle the feedback that drums or a guitar can handle and adjusts accordingly. As Nick and Alyssa individually record their tracks in the recording room, George sits next to him in an office chair, watching the action.

"It's actually kind of fun being on this side of the glass," George posits, as they watch Nick bang on the drums.

"Yeah," Clay says, running a hand through his hair. "When you finally get a hang of it."

"Why did you learn? I just assumed you had your own producer and mixer."

"I guess I needed to. I was on a tighter budget back then. I was taking care of my younger siblings. Still am, but it's easier now that I've made some name for myself and I can make a steady profit doing simple production and sound mixing for other bands and artists on the side." He pauses. "I love music, but it hasn't exactly been a labor of love."

George is silent. He eyes the buttons and slides of the mixer. He realizes he could not even find the volume slider if he were asked to. Clay's story was starkly different from his. His parents shipped him over to America to study and attend university. He had almost thrown that trust and opportunity out the window when he announced he wanted to pursue music instead. George doesn't quite know what to say, and only offers a neutral hum.

Alyssa and Nick finish recording their sessions, including an impressively flourishing violin duet

recorded with Clay simultaneously. After laying in the layers, only vocals were left, leaving only George and Clay. Already 7 PM, Alyssa and Nick are glad to hurry off.

George heads into the recording room, waiting as Clay searches for the appropriate mics. “Goodies,” Clay exclaims, with mics, headphones, and other miscellaneous wires in hand.

He approaches George with one attachable mic and headphones. Clay threads the wire against the back of his neck so as to more naturally attach the mic to the front of George’s shirt. He lightly grasps at George’s shirt material, fingers just grazing over his collarbone.

Already standing in a cramped room, they are standing close to one another. George can see him more closely, faint curls falling across his forehead, shadows of early smile lines near his eyes. George is utterly frozen in place, like he doesn’t want to move to break whatever weak spell was holding them in place.

“Can’t forget these,” Clay says, plugging in headphones and placing them on George’s ears, leaning in slightly closer.

Reminded of where he is, George smiles, and reaches up to tug one ear to the side, so part of his ear is exposed. “So I can listen to the track and you singing at the same time.” He just narrowly avoids exposing the lump that has formed in his throat.

“You look silly,” Clay laughs. But he also reaches up, pulling one half of his own headset to one side so he can hear from that ear.

As Clay sets up the recording, George turns around to take a drink of water, regaining his composure. He tests some light vocal fry and other vocal exercises to prepare himself, high emotion dissipating slightly.

Then they sing and record the song together, trading verses and harmonizing on choruses. Since this is their first time properly recording together, George notices quite a difference in the sound. It really was what he had predicted. Clay’s rougher voice with his own, like old leather, like bitter chocolate. George guesses not many people really experience this, even other singers, but he thinks, when you can sing with someone like *that*, you must feel immediately connected to them, no matter who they really are to you.

Usually singing with his eyes closed, George opens his eyes at this revelation. He glances over at Clay and realizes he is already watching him. George blinks and then doesn’t break the gaze, as they finish off the recording with the chorus and outro, singing directly at one another.

If George had felt they were connected then, surely no one could change his mind now. Singing with Clay felt like a splinter, but more permanent.

The room is silent for half a minute before Clay stands. “I’ll go take a listen to the recording,” he says, clearing his throat. Truthfully, both knew right then and there that this first recording would be the one to make it to the final cut.

George waits a moment, and then joins him outside sitting next to the computer. Clay makes a few notes and edits, before saving the file and shutting down the computer. They sit together, wordless, yet all the words and questions flying above them.

“Hey, thanks,” Clay whispers.

“Oh, yeah, anytime.” George isn’t sure what he’s thanking him for, but it seems like the only thing he can say in the moment.

Despite the soundproofing in the studio, he could just hear light crickets chirping outside in the hot summer night. Clay sat only two feet away from him, and the air between them felt markedly, magnetic. Magnetic was the only word for it.

Out of nowhere, the gap was suddenly and slowly closing. George could just barely feel his body unconsciously moving in Clay's direction, leaning into his armrest, watching as Clay did the same. He could feel his breath. Clay once again reached a hand up to George, this time actually grazing against his collarbone, neck, and then jaw. Magnetic.

A dull sound of something being yanked sounds from the other room. A spell breaks. George and Clay turn their heads towards the door and songwriting room adjacent to them, where Alyssa is holding her phone charger.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I left this behind," she says softly, holding her phone charger. "I'm heading back out now."

"No worries," blurts Clay. "We wrapped up, and we were just heading out too." George nods numbly, standing up to pack up for the night. Extra breathing room seems to fill the air.

The three bid their goodnights to one another, heading out into the night without a look backwards. One thing's certain, George drives out into the darkness feeling as if he has been struck ablaze.

Chapter End Notes

Ablaze

[Verse 1]

Passing stranger,
Is this what they call intuition?
This strange feeling,
Do I stop and question?

[Verse 2]

No more than a face in a revolving door,
A novel left on the bookstore bench,
A brief "wrong number," no more,
This must be Chance having a laugh.

[Chorus]

This strange beginning—
Is only a sequel I'm skimming.
Some unsolved maze,
I'm struck ablaze.

[Bridge]

Yet, familiar as the sun kissing my neck,
Warm like cider after a glass.
Chaste like a years-long lover's peck,
Serene fingers running through tall grass.

[Chorus]

This strange beginning—

Is only a sequel I'm skimming.
Some unsolved maze,
I'm struck ablaze.

[Interlude]

[Chorus]
This strange beginning—
Is only a sequel I'm skimming.
Some unsolved maze,
I'm struck ablaze.

[Outro]
This strange feeling,
Maybe we're enemies, but maybe we're lovers.
So should I stop and question?
Or can I trust my intuition?

I'm struck ablaze.
I'm struck ablaze.

The Right Mirror

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for 100 kudos! I hope you enjoy, and I've attached the lyrics to "The Right Mirror" to the end of this chapter.

Sorry for the delay. Studies are kicking my ass.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay dashes off from the studio, feeling the dusk settling around him. He can distinctly feel his more pronounced and quickened heartbeat, which chases him all the way home, like on some crazed manhunt.

Arriving at his apartment, he hesitates to recall what had happened over the past week, working with *Breathing Room*. Writing lyrics for songs and testing out the sound equipment had been exciting enough. Composing songs had reminded Clay of his love for music that he didn't even realize was fading before he had joined the band, especially after composing the genius bass-violin duet with Nick today. But putting the components of the song together, and more particularly, singing with George just minutes ago, felt absolutely exhilarating.

He feels almost intoxicated. It might be strange to describe an action as making sense, as sublime; but singing with George that night felt precisely like that. Like finding a stray puzzle piece, before ever realizing you were missing any pieces.

Clay shakes his head, tossing his belongings on the counter, including George's lyric book that he had left behind in a haste. He immediately heads to bed, where his cat Patches already laid curled up, sleeping peacefully. In attempts to steady his still beating heart, he presses his chest against his purring cat.

Thoughts and feelings duel one another in his mind. What had truly happened that night? Did Alyssa's abrupt ending to the recording session require acknowledging? Was all of this energy he was feeling just raw excitement for the music? When Clay finally drifts off, he resolves that some thoughts are alright left unspoken. Surely, this connection he feels to George, and the others, would at the very least, allow for him to produce works of music he could take pride in, something he had been missing in years past.

Clay arrives at the studio in the morning still bleary-eyed from a rather sleepless night. He opens the door to laughter, where Alyssa, George, Nick, and another woman had already filtered through. Blinking through his confusion, he looks at the woman in the corner, clad in a large leather jacket with tight ringlet curls. She must be Sandra, *Breathing Room*'s sound engineer, he thinks, just barely recalling today's agenda.

Clay sidles up to Alyssa and Nick, who are already fiddling with their instruments in preparation for today's recording session. *The Right Mirror*, a song George had written, was nearly prepared and only required a few more adjustments before recording later today. George and Sandra sat in the opposite corner, probably discussing the vision for producing the song. Sandra offers a friendly nod to Clay when he walks in, which he returns.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Nick says with a smirk, reaching out to ruffle Clay’s bedhead. “You look like a crackhead, or something.”

“Takes one to know one,” he says, shoving Nick’s arm slightly. They begin laughing, causing George and Sandra to turn their heads in their direction.

Sandra starts. “Hi, Clay! It’s nice to meet you, I’m Sandra.” She leans forward a little, reaching her arm out, and Clay expects her to come forward and shake his hand. Instead, she tosses something over, flat and square. Clay dashes his hand out and just narrowly catches it.

He turns over the casing he had caught, which holds a disc inside. *Ablaze* is sharpied across the surface in script. “Oh, you’ve uploaded it,” he realizes. “What did you think?”

“I think you’re trying to give me a run for my money,” she says encouragingly, tilting her head. “Almost good enough for a final cut I think, although I’d like to do just a few more recordings of each of the instrumentals, separately this time. I thought the vocals were great. How many recordings did you have to take?”

Clay is reminded of their recording session last night. He remembers not even taking a final listen of the vocals because he knew the one they had taken would be final. Sometimes even the most technical projects benefit greatly from intuition. He glances at George, who is not making eye contact with anyone, pretending to tune his guitar, and doesn’t seem set on answering Sandra’s question.

“Oh, not many,” Clay says coolly. “But we’ll see whether you’re right that we need more work on the instrumentals.” Sandra laughs.

“So, let’s get started?” Alyssa asks. “We’ve been waiting long enough for you to get here.” Everyone agrees, and Sandra takes her leave to set up in the recording studio. George offers a stiff nod, glancing slightly at Clay.

Clay offers a silent prayer that he and George will be able to work together as they had just they had in the past week. He had been really enjoying it.

Luckily, they did. Clay and George had to refine a few lines of lyrics for *The Right Mirror* before it was ready for recording. He walks over hesitantly, holding George’s lyric book open to the correct page. He drops it on the table next to George, with the lyrics face up.

George looks at the book before he finally meets his eyes. “So you stole it from me!” he says, after a pause, obviously feigning hurt. He wears a small smile that he probably isn’t aware of himself. But Clay notices.

Clay pauses, shocked that this was as easy as it was. “No I didn’t. You left it here yesterday.”

“What, are you trying to read my deepest, darkest secrets? You creep.” George accuses him with his eyes.

“Shut up, you’re such an idiot,” he says, relaxing, and pulling up a chair.

Working on the music proves to be even easier. That’s the thing about music, he realizes. Once you are working on something you love doing, it’s easier for other things, *life* things, to fall away. Half-finished verses, floating chords, and soft harmonies fill the space instead.

Clay reads the lyrics again, parsing each line slowly. They're poetic, almost to a point of being cheesy. But for a solo, they could prove to be very powerful. "You've gotten a lot better since we first met," he teases.

George hums. "And you're just as mean as since we first met."

"You know what I mean. These are probably my favorite lyrics that you've written. So far."

"Really?"

"Yes? Are you kidding?" He turns the book towards himself. "*'Someone to remind you / Like our math and English teachers do / That all these variables add up to something / That "I am" is a complete sentence too.'*" They're wonderful. I think you're ready to record." Clay closes the book, handing it back to George.

George stands and turns towards Nick and Alyssa, who had finished recording their half of the instrumentals half an hour ago, but not before Clay registers the flicker of the small smile that had returned to George's face.

The four had already decided that this piece would be better off as a solo, so George is being set up in the recording booth with Sandra, alone this time. Clay, Nick, and Alyssa fiddle around with the recording equipment just outside, speaking into random microphones and throwing around strewn pop shields.

Clay finds his hands on a pair of headphones that had been left on the desk after last night's recording session, finding himself lost in thought. It's the same pair George had insisted on wearing lopsided, wearing that silly, heartwarming grin. He thumbs the headphone cushions slowly, before placing them back in the wall cubby they belonged to.

"So," a small voice sounds nearby. Clay turns around to Alyssa. "If you don't mind me asking, what's up with you two?"

"Who two?"

"You know who two. Are you into him?" Her question transports Clay back to last night when Alyssa re-entered the studio, with her phone charger swinging in hand, stood in the hallway.

Clay scoffs, looking down at Alyssa, who was considerably shorter than him. "I could pummel you right now, Alyssa. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You would lose," she threatens. "I'll be more straightforward, then. It looks like something is up. Do you have feelings for George?"

Surprised, he pauses, with his mouth open. "What? No? And... I'm not exactly gay, Alyssa, even if you want to make fun of my outfits."

She laughs at this, nonchalantly. "Well, it's not like you have to be gay to like someone of the same sex as you."

He humors her. "Okay, what do you need to be, then?"

"In love, I guess."

She turns her head towards the recording booth. Clay follows her gaze. George is perched on a

wooden stool, smothered in a woolen hoodie to fight the perpetually cold air conditioning in the studio. He is smiling at something Sandra said - that infectious, George smile - again with his headphones tilted off one ear. Clay is silent.

Alyssa speaks again. “Clay?”

Clay shakes his head slightly, blinking. He directs his gaze towards Alyssa. “Oh. Yeah. I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that.”

Everyone crowds around the recording booth for George’s recording, but there aren’t quite enough chairs to go around in the studio. Sandra obviously wins her own spot as the sound engineer. Clay argues that he’s taller than the rest of them. This leaves Nick and Alyssa reluctantly sharing a chair.

The Right Mirror has that sort of mix of catchy and gritty that could possibly translate well into the pop scene. It’s a song that might catch attention, and has an interesting message. Each member is excited to watch and contribute where they could.

George gives the song a try. He sings earnestly and reflectively. He tries to convey a sense of pride in the song, like he’s looking back on his development. His voice fits the melody well, but the angle isn’t exactly right. Even George comes to this realization, shaking his head at the end of the recording, ready to try again. Sandra suggests a second take.

So George tries again, and then tries a few more times. Sandra suggests he sings it more powerfully, to think of the song as if he is coming into his confidence rather than reflecting on it.

He gives it an honest attempt, but each time you can feel a little more frustration bubbling over than the attempt before. He makes an exasperated noise. “I can’t do this right now. Can we take five?”

“Sure,” Sandra says. “Maybe take a walk for a bit. Clear your head a little, because you’ve got this.” George offers a stiff nod before walking out.

Clay stays in his seat for a moment while everyone else stands up to take a break. He looks around at Nick and Alyssa, who had busied themselves at the coffee machine. Without knowing what he is doing, his feet take him outside, where George had headed.

Clay shields his eyes from the summer sun as he steps outside and searches for George in the parking lot. To his surprise, he hears a car door open violently. He turns towards the noise and watches George slide into his car. Clay marches up and knocks on the car window just before he slips his key into the ignition. George looks at him, annoyed, before rolling down the car window.

“Hello? Where are you going?” he asks. “Aren’t you gonna miss me?”

“Did you see me in there? I don’t think I can do this right now.” He drops his head back into his headrest and heaves a sigh.

“Why are you stressing out? You’re fine.”

“It’s just way too much effort,” he whines, with a pitched voice. He groans a little.

“George- Why are you whining? You know you can sing this.”

“How?”

"Well, first of all, you can start with getting out of the car." He pulls open the car door for him and gestures his exit with his hand. George sighs before heaving himself out, joining Clay in leaning against the side of the car. "You're going to sing this song. At least promise that to yourself."

George grunts in response. Clay takes that as an acceptance. He starts, "I do think Sandra's right. It's a song about finally coming into your confidence, despite this erratic path we call life. It's about being shameless in confiding in and getting help from the friends and family that helped you along the way."

"I know, I wrote it. So?"

"So, don't be afraid to sing it like your life depends on it."

"I know. I know this. I'm just really not sure if I can. Sandra kept using words like... raw? Powerful? I can barely belt," George says, exasperated.

"George," he responds, kind but stern. "Confidence isn't just knowing how good you are. It's also about pushing through something you're scared of, despite the fear of it." He holds up a hand, which casts a shadow, shielding both of his eyes from the sun. "And I think the song would benefit from it."

George looks up, squinting a little, but holding his gaze. "You think so?"

"I don't have to tell you whether I think so. You'll see. Think of why you wrote this song to begin with."

George continues looking into his eyes, questioning. Something breaks, and he grins. "Okay." He sounds matter of fact. "Let's go."

"So, like you said: like my life depends on it?" George asks from the booth, speaking into the microphone.

Clay holds down the button for the talk back system. "Like it's all the energy you've got left in you. Like your knees are about to buckle by the end of it."

George's eyes widen. "Now you just sound scary." Laughter fills the studio, with Clay left wheezing. George recovers from laughter, and breathes deeply before stating, "Okay. So none of you are going to judge me for this, even if it sounds vaguely like I'm torturing some cat in here?"

"Ew. No need to get graphic," Alyssa cringes, leaning over Clay to speak into the microphone. And that's enough reassurance.

Clay would never tell anyone this, but "tortured cat" was quite the apt comparison to George's first few attempts. He's aware these might have been George's first times singing like this, but it sounds mostly forced and strained.

But Clay can feel his trust in him. So he keeps encouraging him, helping him to trust veering off into what he isn't used to- the voice breaks and occasional off-key or off-beat notes. It feels a little like guiding someone along a tightrope, and just being ready to catch them if they fall. "Remember why you wrote this song, George," he encourages, after the first five to six attempts.

George nods. And then it happened. He starts off the song unsteady, questioning, wavering. "*How can this be possible? / When we reinvent ourselves like the weeds...*" The song grows in confidence

as he continues. You could hear it from your chest. He passes through the chorus and by the repeat, his voice is flying, carrying everyone else with him. “*Knowing you’re good only takes you so much nearer / Sometimes you need someone to hold up the right mirror.*” Clay can’t hide his grin. George looks wildly powerful. It’s that sort of moment that feels a little bit sad because you realize you might never be able to experience it again.

George finishes off the song and pauses for half a second. He is looking at him, breathlessly, before he tears off his mic and headphones, which fall to the ground. He runs out of the booth and runs directly into Clay’s arms.

Clay is simultaneously surprised, yet also prepared for this. When George barrels into him, he picks him up off the floor to support the height difference. Giddy with happiness, George’s legs lift from the floor and bend at the knee until he is leaning into him more heavily. Giggles of elation erupt from against his neck, such that Clay’s cheek is rested against George’s head.

“That’s a wrap, I think!” Sandra praises. Alyssa and Nick cheer along. He and George sway for a couple of seconds before he guides him back down to the floor, both beaming at one another.

Everyone bids their goodbyes for the weekend, until it’s just Nick and Clay sitting against the stuccoed wall outside the studio, watching the sun dip below the horizon. They pop the tabs from two soda cans, sharing a drink before the day ends. “Today was so much fun,” Nick says. “I’m so excited for this album.”

“I feel the same way. I think I had forgotten how much I loved music.”

Nick hums. “And we’re picking up traction too. I don’t know who tipped him off, or whether Rocco pulled some strings, but I can’t believe Kory Grow from *Rolling Stone* is coming to watch us record next week.”

Half in disbelief, he responds, “living the dream, as they say.”

They continue to chat wholeheartedly. Nick tilts his head. “You know, you really helped George today. That was the best singing I think I’ve ever seen from him.”

“George was great today.”

“I didn’t think that little freak had it in him.” Both of them laugh. “Also,” he says, swallowing the last of his soda, “Don’t tell him I said this, but, I think George wrote that song about you.”

“What? No. Don’t be stupid.”

Nick stands, tossing out his soda can and pulling out his car keys. “Okay, whatever you say. But I’m never wrong about these things.” He pauses. “Plus, you can’t say you don’t believe me entirely. I swear to God when you two were hugging I saw you smell George’s hair.”

Clay shakes his head, laughing with his mouth open in disbelief. Speechless, he can do little more than stand up, scoff, and hurl a *mostly* empty soda can in Nick’s direction.

Chapter End Notes

[Verse 1]

"Be yourself,"
Still, a north-facing pole.
"Pursue your passions,"
Busy hands, no days so dull.

[Verse 2]

But how can this be possible?
When we reinvent ourselves like the weeds,
Cycle slow like the moon,
Realize ourselves like budding trees?

[Chorus]

When your arms tire from working,
When the path you've chosen is blurring,
Knowing you're good only takes you so much nearer.
Sometimes you need someone to hold up the right mirror.

[Bridge]

Someone to remind you
Like our math and English teachers do,
That all these variables add up to something,
That "I am" is a complete sentence too.

[Chorus]

When your arms tire from working,
When the path you've chosen is blurring,
Knowing you're good only takes you so much nearer.
Sometimes you need someone to hold up the right mirror.

[Chorus]

When your arms tire from working,
When the path you've chosen is blurring,
Knowing you're good only takes you so much nearer.
Sometimes you need someone to hold up the right mirror.

[Outro]

Invite the chaos, welcome the waves,
Because I've since learned how to make them behave.
I know I've made my breakthrough,
And I know you've been watching too.

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